

Finder's Fee

By Peter Schweighofer; illustrations by Matt Busch

Thella knew the Finder would be waiting for them at the back of Lorana's Labyrinth. And he just might be able to get their infiltrator team off the planet without the Empire crashing the party.

Thella took her first officer, a burly brute named Huffreys, and led him by the hand into the bar. Kelada starport's renown Labyrinth was a maze of crooked bar counter and counter-height tables arranged in a life-sized puzzle. Patrons of every species crowded their way, smoking, drinking, socializing in numerous sounds and tones. Several creatures skittered past them, no taller than their knees.

Thella reached over and checked the shoulder pocket on her flight jacket. The flap was snapped down and the data card inside secure. They had gone through a lot of trouble to get that information from the Empire... she wasn't about to let a few difficulties get in her way.

Huffreys bullied a few beings out of their way, all the while looking back skeptically at Thella as if to question her judgment in coming here. Thella knew he didn't like dealing with aliens. But at this point, the Finder was the only one who could help them.

The only three booths in the entire bar were at the end of the maze, if the labyrinth could be said to have an end, and if one could find it. At times the dive seemed to stretch on endlessly. But after a lot of jostling and pushing and almost tripping on the short skittering aliens, Thella and Huffreys found the three booths at the maze's end. And sitting in one was the Finder.

He really wasn't as omnipotent-looking as Thella had imagined. The Finder was a Twi'lek, somewhat taller than average, wrapped in a gray tunic and black hooded cloak. His hands hovered gracefully over a few datapads scattered on the table. Two of the red-scaled, short aliens peered over his shoulder from the booth's corner, eying the datapads as if they were lunch.

"I am Loh'khar, the Finder," the Twi'lek said, looking up from his datapads as if salutations were an afterthought. "You are looking for safe passage off Kelada for you and your friends?"

Thella took a step back. "How did you know?"

Loh'khar looked back at her with sly eyes. "It is my business to know such things," he said. "It is not my business to tell you how."

Oh. Thella slipped into the bench opposite the Twi'lek. Huffreys stood just outside the booth watching Loh'khar and the bar's patrons, his hand on his blaster handle.

"Is this how you anticipate your host's hospitality?" Loh'khar asked, looking down at Thella over his upturned palms. The two red-scaled aliens tittered to themselves in the corner.

Thella bit her lip, then pulled a small pouch from her service belt. She tossed it, and the pouch landed with a thud near one of Loh'khar's hands. He opened it, sniffed the contents gingerly, pulled the drawstrings and sequestered the pouch in one of the folds of his tunic.

"*Kau'lehalle so fendoon,*" he said. "The guests are welcome. So, I hear you have run into some trouble with the Imperial constabulary.

"Let's cut to the chase," Thella said, leaning over the table. "I've got six team members to fly out of here. The Imperials locked up our transport in impound with two squads of stormtroopers as soon as they found us breaking their bank."

"To which system do you require transportation?" Loh'khar calmly asked.

"Anywhere there aren't any Imperials. Gelgalar will do. We can catch another transport there for our final destination. I need a flight jockey who can blast us past the Imperial blockade upstairs. I need a field medic, or at least an Emdee droid who can fix up my security specialist. I need a decrypt unit."

"You are certain what you retrieved from the Imperial garrison post requires a decrypt unit?" Loh'khar chided. "I would have thought the processor you stole would require an interface pad..."

"Whatever. And I need all this soon -- before the stormtroopers combing this starport find the hidey hole where the rest of my team is lying low."

"What you ask is complex," Loh'khar sighed. "But it is possible... for the proper compensation."

"Whatever I've got, you're entitled to it," Thella replied, giving Loh'khar the upturned palms sign.

Loh'khar smiled. "Rizzal," he called, turning to one of the red-scaled aliens. "Go tell Undermaster Neffron I could have some valuable information on the Imperials for him if he can give me his hard-coded interface pad. Deliver the device into my hands. And if you see Nizzal on your way out, have her report immediately." Rizzal giggled once, scurried beneath the table, and bounded out into the crowded bar, dodging the patrons at knee-height.

Loh'khar turned to the alien's companion, leaning attentively over the table. "Vizzal, go visit Fotane the droid dealer, and tell him I shall take my payment on that favor I arranged for him with starport customs -- and remind him it can be revoked. Return with that Emdee droid. Yes, the one in the back room. Escort it to docking bay KB-101." Vizzal giggled some more. "And be quick about it!" Loh'khar snapped. Vizzal was off under the table and skittering through the bar.

Another red-scaled alien, almost identical to the other two, popped its head up from beneath the table. "Ah, Nizzal, so glad you could make it," Loh'khar said. "We have some clients here who need our help. I want you to go to docking bay KB-101. Find the Silver One. Gently remind her about that concussion missile tube I arranged to be installed on her starship, then escort her back here immediately." Nizzal nodded, a feral look in her eye as she peered at Thella, then sped off beneath the table.

"It will take them but a few moments if all goes well," Loh'khar said. "Please, let us order some drinks. Something to eat, perhaps."

Huffreys shuffled uncomfortably, watching the Twi'lek and being particularly careful not to let one of those red-scaled aliens sneak up on him. Thella watched Loh'khar as he sifted through his datapads, adding information here, checking data there, slipping a data card from one to another to transfer more notes.

An attractive Twi'lek waitress squeezed past Huffreys and set the drinks and a plate of some chandad nibbles on the table. Loh'khar absently fingered his glass, but didn't sip.

Thella began rapping her fingers on the table when one of the red-scaled aliens zipped beneath the table and popped up next to Loh'khar. It giggled at the Twi'lek, then brought up what looked like a thick datapad with several extra keys and input jacks.

"Ah, Rizzal, nice job," Loh'khar said, removing the hard-coded interface pad from the creature's hands. The alien eyed the plate of chandad. "Go ahead," Loh'khar said, "You may have two." The alien's agile arms leaped out from its clothing and snatched up two nibbles. It gobbled them down without a second thought.

"This should help you decrypt the processor you acquired from the Imperials," Loh'khar said, sliding the box across the table to Thella.

"When can you get the other things we need?" she asked.

"I assure you, they will be forthcoming very shortly." Loh'khar gracefully reached for the chandad plate and took a nibble. "As for my compensation..."

"I'm not paying out anything until everything is set," Thella said.

Another red-scaled alien popped up beside Rizzal and giggled at Loh'khar. A moment later, a woman with striking platinum blonde hair swaggered up to the booth. By her boots, vest and blaster, Thella could tell the woman was a smuggler. "You call?" the smuggler asked.

"Platt, how nice to see you," Loh'khar said, smiling a broad grin.

"These kind folks and their friends require discreet transportation to somewhere out-of-the-way. Where did you say? Gelgalar?"

"Anywhere backwater," Thella said.

"I'm headed in that direction anyway," the smuggler said, eyeing Loh'khar with what Thella thought was contempt. "Is that why Vizzal brought that surgical droid over to the *Last Chance*?"

Loh'khar ignored her. "So, now that everything is satisfactory, we shall discuss my compensation ..."

"I don't have a lot of money on me for a finder's fee..." Thella began.

"I said compensation, not payment," Loh'khar corrected her. "I have the perfect idea." He reached out gracefully toward Thella, seemingly intending to stroke her chin. Before his hand even stretched halfway across the table, Huffreys reached over from his guard post at the booth's edge and grasped the Twi'lek's wrist.

"Is this any way to treat your host?" Loh'khar asked.

"I think I know what he has in mind," Thella told Huffreys. The man released his grip on Loh'khar's wrist.

"Thank you."

"He wants this," Thella said, unsnapping the shoulder pocket to her flight jacket and removing a datacard. She glared at Loh'khar. "We went through a lot of trouble to get this..."

"All I ask is to copy it," the Twi'lek replied, reaching for a datapad with an empty data card slot. "I have certain friends who would very much like to know what the sector fleet is up to. Besides, you never know what kind of information will be useful to others."

Thella reluctantly handed Loh'khar the data card. The Twi'lek slotted the card, typed in some commands on the datapad, removed Thella's datacard and inserted one of his own.

"Thank you. It is always a pleasure doing business with the Rebel Alliance."